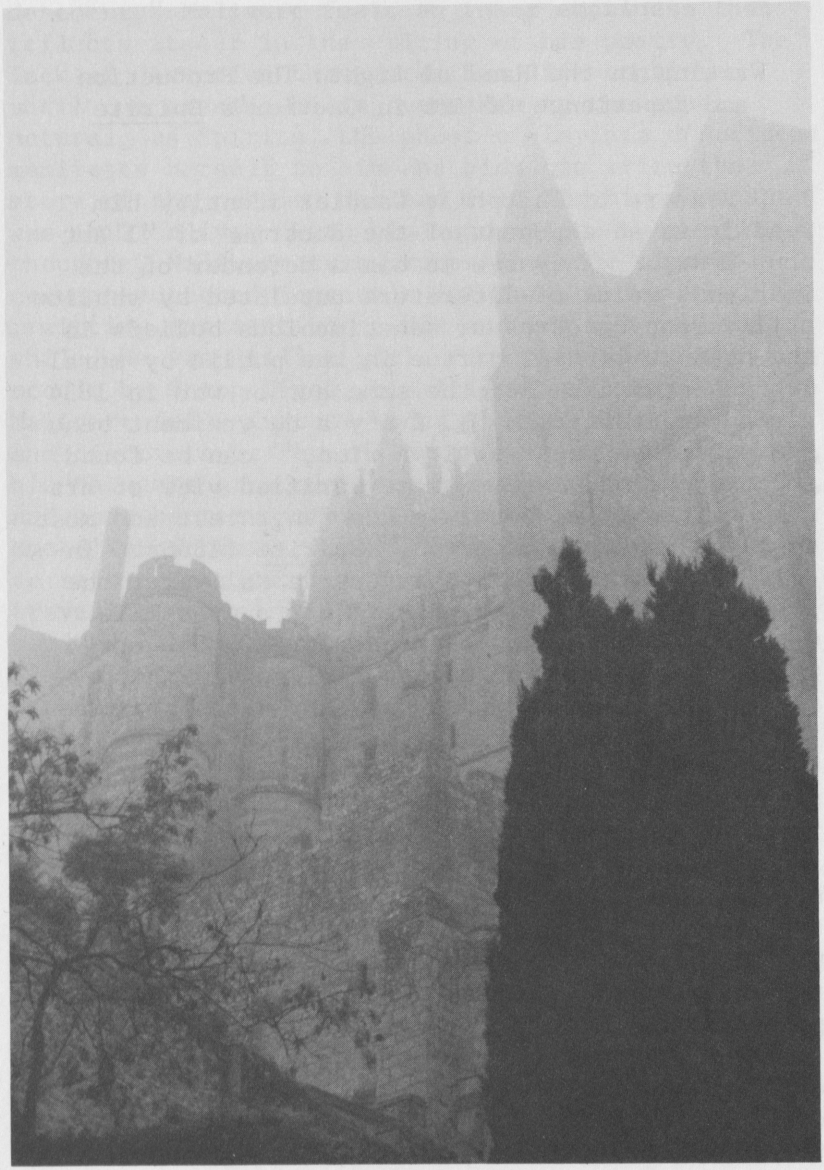

Writing in the Hand of Light: The Production and Experience of Art in Gautier's Spirite

Readers of Théophile Gautier identify him readily as an exponent of the doctrine of "l'Art pour l'Art." They see in him a defender of the intrinsic value of literature untainted by shallow utilitarian concerns or sanctimonious beliefs in the need to instill virtue in the public by moralistic posturing. Yet the same author who in 1834 already had affirmed "[i] l n'y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien,"[1] can be found to have evolved an even more rarified view of art some thirty years later in his lengthiest and most complex "conte fantastique," Spirite (1866). Indeed, despite the fact that Guy de Malivert, the protagonist in Spirite, is himself a poet like Gautier, the tale reveals that for him the most intense experience of beauty lies not in the production of a series of texts, but in the celebration of the love he feels for Spirite, a love that has the effect of turning his life itself into a work of art. An analysis of the tale may thus reveal how Gautier's ideal of art had attained an even greater purity a mere six years before his death. Paradoxically, the implication of the text is that the highest aesthetic awareness is not the one that leaves behind messages or artifacts, but is instead the one that forgoes expression altogether.[2]

Spirite recounts the story of Guy de Malivert, a worldly idler, frequenter of exclusive social circles, and eligible bachelor sought after by the most attractive of Parisian ladies, such as the lovely but vapid Mme d'Ymbercourt. While unattached and uninvolved in any serious "affaires

de coeur," Malivert feels an inner emptiness that reflects itself in the writing of his poetry. The lack of direction that marks his life continues until one evening he is overtaken by the supernatural, as Spirite, the ghost of Lavinia d'Aufideni, manifests herself to him and bids him write the story of the passion she had felt for him when she was still alive. With his hand guided by her thoughts, Malivert transcribes the tale of this convent-educated ingenue's infatuation for him, his unwitting inattention to her and her own death while she was still a girl. Initiated into the occult by Baron Féroë, his friend and confidant, Malivert falls further under Spirite's influence and discovers he returns her love. In her presence, his thoughts grow clearer, his poetry more eloquent, and soon he terminates his pointless liaison with Mme d'Ymbercourt. Restless and bereft, he longs to rejoin Spirite, but cannot do so until, when traveling abroad in Greece, he is murdered by a band of highwaymen and his own death sets him free.

Throughout, the story's emphasis is on the problem of art as a method of communication, art that, at the outset, is not as yet redeemed by love. And so it is no surprise that early on Malivert, as intellectual, "désoeuvré" and member of "tout Paris," feels himself to some extent an exile in a society that proscribes spontaneity in relationships in favor of propriety. There he finds oral communication restricted to the compliments and commonplaces spoken on receiving lines, written communication to the names inscribed on dance cards, and visual communication to the examination of beautiful women through lorgnettes at the theater. Comfortably understimulated in this milieu, Malivert is shown leading a life of self-indulgent mental inactivity, "dans cette paresseuse disposition d'âme où l'absence de pensée est préférable à la plus belle idée exprimée

en termes sublimes."[3] Living on the level of the body, he enjoys the dormancy of his intellect, as he sits somnolently in his drawing room beneath the muted light of his lamp, while the sounds of the outside world filter in to him through a layer of snow on the street. Yet already one sees evidence of his repugnance for this empty life of social rounds and his need for recourse to his art as the only means of honest self-expression. His serene numbness of mind seems more to have resulted from an effort to inure himself against the monotony of an existence scheduled around endless teas and formal dinners. Even before discovering the spirit world, Malivert balks at the need to speak and write while revealing nothing of himself and learning nothing of others. It is this unwillingness to send dishonest messages that first causes his reluctance to appear at one of Mme d'Ymbercourt's receptions or to send her a note alleging a reason for his absence. And it is his insistence on a kind of communicative integrity that first draws Spirite to him, to show him the true meaning of art and teach him to express himself with a greater immediacy and transparency than he ever imagined possible.

Gautier's tale shows that, because of the lack of meaningful content in normal conversations, information about people's real thoughts can best be culled from observation of their behavior, dress and gestures. A blush, a downcast eye, a look of satisfied conceit, may make a more eloquent statement about an individual's private feelings than the one that he intends. Yet Gautier does not suggest that appearances are any less important in motivating actions. Conventional exchanges, evidence gained from superficial contacts, cause inferences to be made that can have a binding effect on those involved. It is for this reason that Malivert's frequent presence at Mme d'Ymbercourt's parties leads others to make assumptions that

almost force him to marry a woman he does not even love. Malivert has himself observed how conversations in social settings include all those capable of overhearing a message and substituting for the intended meaning one distorted to fit their own interpretation. Eavesdroppers control the sense given to one's words, so Malivert finds that he can best express himself in writing, where he can posit a generalized audience to begin with. Thus when Spirite remarks to Malivert, "chez vous le parfait gentleman cachait un écrivain distingué" (Spirite, p. 235), she is observing how Malivert in face-to-face contact discloses less of himself than when addressing an audience he cannot even see. In writing, Malivert can pay more attention to saying what he means. The nature of speech is such that it can be appropriated by anyone in range of hearing. It is paradoxically a more public form of communication than is writing, which allows a sensitive reader to experience a private understanding with an author by sharing an appreciation of the finer nuances of his meaning. "[L]a vraie attitude de l'âme," asserts Spirite, "finit par se révéler pour celui qui sait lire . . ." (Spirite, p. 235).

Gautier's tale suggests that, further, beneath the various masks society makes a man adopt, there exists a core of personal truth that resists the pressure to flatter and deceive. Yet, since the social text is a collaborative one, both in its rules and composition, it often suffocates the individual's impulse toward directness of expression. For Malivert to voice his most personal needs and feelings, he must erase the social text as palimpsest, must empty his mind and restore it to the status of a blank page.[4] Otherwise, discretion and dissimulation are best cultivated in this gala social world, in which the most confidential message is the one first seized on and converted into public speculation. That is why, in social settings, Baron Féroë wears an air of non-commital

impassivity and Malivert camouflages his boredom with perfect cordiality. Having been taught to still the language of the heart, Malivert is at first a man without a genuine inner life, a figure who dispenses pleasantries and shares in banal conversation absent-mindedly. He appears a sleep-walker through the arid social pageantry he is part of. To him and Féroë, the soirées they attend seem peopled by throngs of lovely, soulless automata. "Charmante personne!" remarks the baron to Malivert about one particularly graceful lady. "[Q]uel dommage qu'elle n'ait pas d'âme. Celui qui en deviendrait amoureux éprouverait le sort de l'étudiant Nathaniel dans 'L'Homme au sable' d'Hoffmann; il courrait risque de serrer au bal un mannequin entre ses bras et c'est une valse macabre que celle-là pour un homme de coeur" (Spirite, pp. 183-184).

This motif of lifelessness and somnambulism figures prominently in Gautier's tale, from the incuriosity of Malivert as he lounges before the fire with his cat -- "toute la soirée il avait été paresseux, somnolent, engourdi par une torpeur de bien-être" (Spirite, p. 177) -- to the crucial later scene when Malivert welcomes the presence of Spirite as she plays for him on his piano. The evolution of the character of Malivert from a twilight consciousness to a state of heightened thought and feeling is the main thread of Gautier's story, which in effect describes a process of awakening. It is not coincidental that it is at a presentation of "La Sonnambula" that young Lavinia first experiences a disappointment of her hope to attract the attention of Guy de Malivert. It is natural as well that this failure eventually brings her to the realization that true love can only be expressed when both parties are freed of the encumbrance of the body, which dulls their minds and imprisons them in an obscure sleep of the senses.

Beyond this automatism of expression promoted in society, there is the awareness one experiences in the process of artistic creation. Unlike the way that Malivert must speak when he is in society, his statements as an artist retain their power by having to pass only through his chosen medium. In the same way that the assumption of a remote audience enables a speaker to communicate in a less impersonal way, so does the distancing of the artist from his subject allow him to achieve a better creative rendering of his material. Thus the success of art depends on its divorce from the original model, as the abstraction and the emptiness of form calls for a particular content to make it live by filling it with meaning. Spirite observes how painting is like memory, in that the artist flees a subject whose presence overwhelms him with the excess of its evidence. The imagination works, she says, "comme un peintre qui poursuit un portrait en l'absence du modèle, adoucissant les méplats, fondant les teintes, estompant les contours, et ramenant malgré lui le type à son idéal particulier" (Spirite, p. 242). The purpose of art is to enable a man to rediscover his ideal. The value of creative effort is not the art work or the appreciation it commands. Rather, creativity is experienced when the artist, through an absorption in his subject, becomes his own medium.

On the one hand, art is a better transmitter than speech because it is of less consequence to whom the idea is addressed or whether it is received intact. Yet the art object, be it sculpture, canvas or poem, may by its solidity and permanence serve as a poor receptacle for a meaning that is forever seeking to amend itself. In writing, the fidelity of the artifact to the idea depends upon their synchronicity. Rather than having a preserved text survive the moment of the thought's articulation, the transcribed message should allow

its own immediate deletion. Since all writing entails an internal mediation, a setting into words, the author performs a variety of functions, as creator, copyist and reader. His is the mind that thinks, the hand that writes and the critical faculty that evaluates, and at each of these stages, he runs the risk of losing control of his work and faces the possibility that "je" might indeed become "un autre." Just as the link between the speaker and his audience in elegant Parisian society is tenuous and unreliable, so is the one between the thought and its expression. Thus Guy de Malivert finds he is capable of saying what he means only when it is no longer he who says it, but Spirite, who can read his mind, who knows him not by what he says and writes but by what is revealed "between the lines." Once possessed by Spirite, Malivert is freed of the need for mediation. He is no longer an author alienated from his message. Under Spirite's influence, he does not write, but takes dictation. Instead of struggling to match a creative impulse with an appropriate expression, he finds that in the place of thought there is his moving hand, which becomes itself a kind of living text. Through Spirite there exists a perfect correlation between the word and the idea. After all, he says, "la main n'était . . . qu'un signe" (Spirite, p. 226).

As one moves from exchanges in polite society, beyond art to the transparency of meaning between those in love, the mediation of messages is made more easy since the sender can be less concerned with how his words will be received. Yet before Malivert can engage in any real communication, he must first become more practiced in the art of honest reflection. Not surprisingly, the first time Spirite manifests herself to Malivert is through a mirror. But it is not one designed to reassure a subject about the acceptability of the

image he projects in society, a mirror used in the way one might expect of Mme d'Ymbercourt -- "un de ces miroirs du siècle dernier, comme on en voit souvent dans les toilettes et les départs pour le bal de Longhi, le Watteau de la décadence vénitienne . . ." (Spirite, p. 205). Instead the glass Spirite appears in is said to resemble "une ouverture pratiquée sur un vide rempli d'idéales ténèbres" (Spirite, p. 205). As at the beginning Malivert's mind had been emptied of his social concerns and obligations, so here the mirror is made to lose its reflective property and does more than merely reproduce the physical world it faces. In it Malivert's vision ceases to be of things as they are and becomes a vision of things as he would have them. His mind is made receptive to thoughts no longer trivialized by the need for expression, so that what he sees is "plutôt l'idée d'une couleur que la couleur elle-même, une vapeur . . . si délicatement nuancée que tous les mots humains ne sauraient la rendre" (Spirite, p. 207). In her ability to rouse Malivert from his somnambulistic state, Spirite frees him of his dependence on words. She reveals him to himself and puts him back in touch with long forgotten feelings. By giving back to him the image of an ideal obscured by his worldly vision, she acts as a reflector of that part of him he had let lie dormant for so long. And by expressing through her music his yearning for the sublime, she works to mediate the ineffable. So as she plays at the keyboard:

> Guy reconnut une de ses poésies,
> -- celle qu'il aimait le mieux, --
> transposée de la langue du vers
> dans la langue de la musique. . . .
> -- Spirite, avec une intuition
> merveilleuse, rendait l'au-delà
> des mots, le non-sorti du verbe

> humain, . . . l'indicible et l'inexprimable, le desideratum de la pensée au bout de ses efforts, et tout le flottant, le flou, le suave qui déborde du contour trop sec de la parole (Spirite, pp. 281-282).

As the relationship between Spirite and Malivert develops, the understanding between the two begins to forego the need for mediation, progressing beyond words and music, and becoming, as Ross Chambers says, more communion than communication.[5] At this point, a curious inversion of perception takes place in Malivert. Having entered into contact with Spirite and glimpsed through her a world of light and splendor, Malivert finds he is the one condemned to carry out an existence in exile, in the shadow zone of the living here below. Suddenly it is no longer Spirite who appears the ghostly or insubstantial one, but rather the peers whom Malivert must continue frequenting as long as he remains alive. "[L]es hommes ne lui apparu[r]ent plus que comme les ombres lointaines, comme des fantômes avec lesquels il n'avait plus de rapport" (Spirite, p. 284).

So if there is one last medium to be transcended before a perfect understanding between the two can be achieved, it is no longer speech or writing, but rather the medium of the body, "cette forme épaisse et lourde," which Malivert says "[l]'empêche de [s]'élever avec l'âme adorée aux sphères où planent les âmes" (Spirite, p. 286). Yet he finds that even in death the body leaves behind a written text that substitutes its meaning for the meaning of the person's life. However, when Malivert visits the burial site of Lavinia d'Aufideni, he is pleased he can associate his

vision of Spirite with the history of her mortal antecedent. That is because he reads the inscription on her tomb not so much as the closing line in the prosaic account of her death, but as the opening line in the poem of Spirite's eternal life, which he knows will acquire its meaning only when the two lovers act together to compose it.

While Chambers is right in seeing Gautier's tale as "une allégorie de l'inspiration littéraire" (Chambers, p. 4), an expression of Malivert's longing to escape, by way of death, from a world of form and words into one of content, light and life, perhaps the real focus of the story lies elsewhere. By pointing to the need to learn a type of writing that foregoes all texts, that becomes instead a kind of aesthetic of perception, the tale seems to stress the moment when art itself must be transcended. By using the work to demonstrate the inadequacy of literature to his story's subject, Gautier makes his tale a celebration of love and art at once. Yet it is an art the exercise of which must be renounced lest it encounter its own inevitable failure at the moment of the writer's greatest inspiration. On the one hand, one might say it is Malivert's beatification and deliverance in death that mark the high point of the story. But it is also the point at which the narrative acknowledges its limitations. Once Malivert leaves behind his need for creative expression -- "L'art lui-même est oublié pour l'amour" (Spirite, p. 305), Spirite proclaims -- his transfiguration frees him of poetry and words and effectively places him outside the range of Gautier's own literary skills. So at the moment of the lovers' assumption, when there is nothing left to say on their account, the text can only turn back to Baron Féroë, who, like other men, must make do with only his creative gifts to seize hold of his ideal.

How, then, in the context of Gautier's tale, can art be understood as a conveyance of the indescribable? It would seem that for the act of mediation to bring with it no distortion of the message, art must be less a means of producing works than a manner of experiencing the world. No longer paper, clay or canvas, it is the individual's own consciousness on which images make their impress. It is the mind, purified by the experience of love, that becomes the page on which the hand of his emotions writes its message. Ultimately, it is Spirite rather than Malivert who is revealed to be the artist. It is she who sees beauty all around her and recreates the world in the image of her love. An unsophisticated young woman, Lavinia-Spirite has a mind not yet covered by the text of social rules, a mind whose blankness enables it all the better to receive the image of her beloved's face. "[V]otre image ne s'effaça pas de mon souvenir," she says to Malivert. "Elle se conserva sur le vélin blanc de mon âme comme ces traits légers tracés au crayon par une main habile" (Spirite, pp. 229-230). Thus it is Spirite in whom the gift of artistic vision makes its first appearance. Having led a life both too protected and too short to permit her to become disillusioned, she retains the innocence she needs to view the world as a play created by an artist, a pageant held for her own personal enjoyment. "La vie est toujours la même;" she observes, "c'est une pièce de théâtre dont seuls les spectateurs changent; mais celui qui n'a pas vu la pièce s'y intéresse comme si elle était faite exprès pour lui, et à sa première représentation" (Spirite, p. 239). Since productivity is less a measure of creative talent than is sensitivity, the poet is not so much the one who writes as the one who reads, the one who sees. Similarly, the act of composing is so devalued in the story as to be little more than

a capitulation, a surrender of the head to hand. In this regard, Malivert is just a medium through which his poem passes. Art depends then on understanding, on taking in the light. It is Lavinia first and then Spirite who, irradiated from within by love, can recognize in everything the imprint of the "able hand," who can look out over the roof tops of the city and make out "[la] signature que Paris appose au bas de tous ses horizons" (Spirite, p. 233). Conversely, Malivert, for whom society is an empty and uninteresting show, is too blind to appreciate life conceived as one great work of art. He fails to sense Lavinia's love. "Un héros de roman n'y eût pas manqué;" Spirite says reprovingly to him, "mais vous n'étiez pas un héros de roman" (Spirite, p. 241).

Not surprisingly, once delivered from her body, Lavinia is changed from a victim of circumstances into Spirite, an active force arranging for the accomplishment of a love which had eluded her on earth. No longer a participant or spectator in the play of life, Spirite takes charge, assumes direction. Clearly Malivert is important in the tale only as that through which Spirite works. It is she who dictates his poems, guides him to a greater appreciation of beauty and finally leads him to an understanding that all actions leave behind a trace which together makes one's life a kind of text which can itself be judged as a work of art. While only death allows Spirite to reconstruct her existence in aesthetic terms -- "elle refaisait, après la mort, son chaste roman de pensionnaire chapitre par chapitre" (Spirite, p. 285) -- she gives this insight to Malivert while he is still alive. She enables him to realize that the only art that is worthwhile is animated from within by feeling. As for Malivert, once he has finished his period of exile on earth and forgotten art for love, he has no further need to convert his experience into writing.

Gautier's text abandons him too, just as he withdraws from literature. Instead, with Malivert's disappearance, the narrative turns to his footman Jack, who like his master at the beginning of the tale, longs for nothing more than a peaceful somnolence, a purely physical well-being undisturbed by creativity or thought.[6]

Gautier's account seems to define art's province, then, as neither that of the complacent and uninquisitive nor of those whose spiritual fulfillment is so complete as to make creative effort superfluous. Yet for Malivert, the case is different. As long as he is alienated from society, separated from his audience and kept distant from the source of his inspiration, his art is more for him than just the medium of his ideas. It is the only thing that he can touch, that can compensate him for the inaccessibility of his ideal. The need to write is born then of the disunion love seeks to overcome. So while Spirite and Malivert remain apart, she must go on occupying and showing him his thoughts. But once death has united them, they no longer require literature as the bridge between earth and heaven, as the bond between two beings. Gautier's tale points out that art is an unsatisfactory medium and gives at most a crude and incomplete copy of the feelings underlying it. And already following the evening Spirite sets his poetry to music, Malivert has sensed their souls merge in understanding, and has ceased to struggle in the throes of writing. Yet even when Malivert stops creating, Spirite's hand must continue for a while guiding him, writing and editing a life still marred by imperfection. She accompanies him to Greece and prevails upon him not to take his life. When Malivert is attacked and killed by bandits on the roadside, his death marks the final chapter in the work of love that Malivert has lived and Spirite authored. Once more Spirite's hand appears, made visible both to bring to Malivert deliverance and

affix a signature to a creation that has just this moment been completed. There is seen at the dying man's side "une figure d'une éclatante blancheur . . . qui posait sur la blessure du voyageur . . . une main de lumière" (Spirite, p. 311). No longer a hand of flesh which, in its motion, distorts and falsifies the ideas of the mind, it is this time the perfect medium, one that illumines and makes clear. Having known the meaninglessness of communication in society, Malivert had first been able to redeem his life by having recourse to the constraint of words. Gradually though in his own writing and in the taking of Spirite's dictation, Malivert transcends the need for art. At the end, all his surviving messages disappear and Gautier's text falls silent, as Malivert's life is turned into a finished art work, a story plotted by Spirite and written by her in the hand of light.

ROBERT E. ZIEGLER
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NOTES

[1] Théophile Gautier, Mademoiselle de Maupin (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), p. 45.

[2] For other views on the importance of the role of the artist in Gautier's "contes fantastiques," see: Albert B. Smith, Théophile Gautier and the Fantastic, University of Mississippi Romance Monographs (University: Univ. of Miss. Press, 1977), pp. 93-117, and Hilda Nelson's discussion of "Arria Marcella" in "Théophile Gautier: The Invisible and Impalpable World: A 'Demi-Conviction,'" The French Review, 45, No. 4 (1972), 828.

[3] Théophile Gautier, Spirite, in Contes fantastiques (Paris: Union général d'éditions, 1973), p. 168. All further references to this work appear in the text.

[4] Poulet points out how Gautier viewed the effort to disengage himself from time and material reality, to recover a past that was not lost, but only obscured by present impressions as the reading of a palimpsest. "Ainsi dans le poème de Gautier, 'Le Retour' . . . on trouve la métaphore du souvenir réapparaissant dans l'esprit 'comme en un palimpseste à travers d'autres signes, d'un ancien manuscrit ressuscitent les lignes.'" (Georges Poulet, Etudes sur le temps humain [Paris: Plon, 1972], I, 324.)

[5] Ross Chambers, "Spirite" de Théophile Gautier: une lecture, Archives des Lettres Modernes, 4, No. 153 (Paris: Minard, 1974), p. 37. All further references to this work appear in the text.

[6] "Aussi, quelle diable d'idée a-t-il de chevaucher toujours par des pays sales, mal pavés, absurdes, faméliques," Jack muses uncomprehendingly about his master, "tandis que nous pourrions être à Paris, douillettement installés dans un intérieur confortable . . ." (Spirite, p. 307).